

Introduction

This is a tale of two conflicting interests over a cultural landscape, between heritage conservation and political and economic expediency. Belatedly it had a happy ending. It reflects my personal involvement in heritage issues across the years, so my opinions may seem unduly on the side of heritage. For this I make no apology.

Few Australians could locate Recherche Bay on a map, while pronouncing the place 'research'. Until recently, fewer still were aware of the significant role played by French navigators in charting Australian coasts. French activities have been better appreciated since commemorative celebrations for bicentenaries of their voyaging, followed by lauding the four centuries since documented European cockleshell vessels coasted through Australian waters during 1606.

It was different a century ago, when nationalist sentiment associated with Federation simply identified history as sagas of exploration and acclaimed British achievements on sea and land. This typical message was conveyed to school children when they read Charles Long's *Stories of Australian exploration*, published in 1903 but current into the '30s when it excited (and misinformed) this schoolboy author.

British seadogs commanded the seas in Long's narrative. William Dampier merited seven pages, James Cook 18 pages, while Bass and Flinders required 28 pages. By contrast, French voyages were by-passed. D'Entrecasteaux was dismissed in two lines and Baudin received two rather derogatory paragraphs. Had Cook or Flinders reached Recherche Bay before French nationals, perhaps its modern story would have been more concerned with heritage values. The rhetoric of Prime Minister John Howard's government promotes the exploits of British heritage and peoples, so in this case it would have been unlikely to sanction the cultural and environmental vandalism proposed at Recherche Bay, which was the occasion of writing this book. As it was, this expedition memorialised the ships, officers and savants by scattering French place names in Tasmania and around the Pacific. This should surely have raised questions in Australian minds concerning the importance of the enterprise.

Recherche Bay is now a two-hour drive south from Hobart, in Tasmania's extreme south-east. Europeans first entered the Bay in 1792, although Aboriginal Tasmanians had settled southern Tasmania more than 30,000 years earlier. Vice-Admiral Bruny d'Entrecasteaux sailed his two vessels *Recherche* and *Espérance* into its sheltered waters on 23 April 1792. It proved an excellent haven for sailing ships. Huon de Kermadec,¹ captain of *Espérance* assessed it to be 'a safe and convenient port, where nature itself seems to take pleasure in assembling an infinity of resources useful to sailors who want to anchor there, whether it

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be for refreshing the crew after a long voyage or for repairing no matter what on the ship, even careening'.

Its entrance is delineated by peninsulas about 2.5 kilometres apart. Once inside the bay it is 7.5 kilometres from D'Entrecasteaux River at the northern end, to Cockle Creek in the south. Abundant supplies of fresh water, the navigable depth of the sea and the sandy and muddy bottom, which secured anchors, were great advantages. So was the shelving beach, which provided safe grounding for careening vessels. Testimony to the harbour's protective qualities is given by the fate of the *James Craig*, which was sunk in the late 1920s near the 1792 French anchorage. It survived for half a century until it was raised, taken to Hobart and later restored and moored near Sydney's National Maritime Museum with the Sydney Heritage Fleet.

Upon entering the harbour, d'Entrecasteaux exclaimed in his journal that: 'It will be difficult to describe my feelings at the sight of this solitary harbour situated at the extremities of the world, so perfectly enclosed that one feels separated from the rest of the universe.'² The area feels almost as remote today, with its dark green forest fringing much of the harbour. Although timber was selectively harvested almost a century ago, regrowth largely has replicated the scene that so impressed the French. To the west is a backdrop of rugged mountain peaks, including the frequently snow-capped Mt La Perouse, a beautiful natural monument to the failed prime objective of the d'Entrecasteaux expedition — to locate the lost La Pérouse expedition.

The frigates *Recherche* and *Espérance* sailed from Brest Harbour on 28 September 1791 in their vain search for La Pérouse, whose two ships were last seen leaving Botany Bay early in 1788. Their failure to locate the missing vessels and the disintegration of the expedition at Java during 1793 suggests a forlorn outcome for this well-equipped expedition. This was accentuated because the voyage claimed the lives of d'Entrecasteaux, his two captains, Huon de Kermadec and D'Hesmivy d'Auribeau, and many crew members.

This is the story of that ill-fated expedition, but it is focused upon its greatest success and invaluable contribution to science, navigation and the heritage of Aboriginal Tasmanians. Their two visits to Recherche Bay, in 1792 and 1793, totalled almost seven weeks. Later significant events in that harbour are also included in this story of an important place in Australian history.

Unfortunately, the second part of this story concerns the sad modern sequel. It is a tale of Federal and State ineptitude and disregard for cultural and heritage values in the interests of crass political opportunism and economic self-interest. As the nominator of a cultural landscape at Recherche Bay for registration under Commonwealth legislation as a National Heritage Place, I propose examining the saga, which involved the Tasmanian State Labor and the Commonwealth Coalition governments. Happily, the area nominated is now a registered National Heritage

Place. However, the proposed compromise solution would have ensured its destruction as an historical and cultural landscape. Then a white knight arrived on the bank floor in the person of Dick Smith who underwrote the cost of purchasing the area in dispute. I was involved in the Franklin Dam High Court case during 1982–83 and it is disappointing, even dishonourable, to find comparable rhetoric and denial or disregard of evidence repeated in this case, despite the documented evidence for its heritage significance for all Australians.

Before recounting the experiences of the d'Entrecasteaux expedition in south-east Tasmania, that exploration must be understood within the momentous and intriguing context of those years between La Pérouse's exit in 1788 and the wretched termination of the enterprise in Java during 1793. They embrace those most memorable years in French history, from rebellious mutterings to storming the Bastille, culminating in the Terror, when the guillotine ruled.

Louis XVI was alive when the expedition sailed, although the crews heard of his execution only upon their arrival in Dutch Java late in 1793; a matter of deep moment because of the divisions aboard ship between Royalists and Republicans. At that time they also had the misfortune to learn that Holland was at war with France. Although Louis XVI was virtually powerless at the time the ships sailed, he took a deep personal interest in their objectives and welfare. He wrote a long memorandum to accompany and advise d'Entrecasteaux on his voyage, solicitous of the crew's health and of the well being of any indigenous people encountered. There is a tradition that, on his way to the guillotine in 1793, Louis asked whether any news had yet been received concerning the fate of La Pérouse. The day of his execution was the date when the expedition entered Recherche Bay for its second visit.

Given the rivalry and conflict between France and England, suspicions multiplied concerning French territorial intentions in unmapped Australian waters. After all, La Pérouse followed the First Fleet into Botany Bay a few days after its arrival. Surveying activities by d'Entrecasteaux, and by Baudin seven years later, were suspected to have strategic objectives, despite their avowed scientific and humanitarian aims. This political context is crucial to appreciating international relationships.

Regardless of revolution and war during these crucial times, European cultural life flourished in this era. These years witnessed Mozart at his instrumental and operatic peak. In Austria, between 1788 and 1791, he composed the *Jupiter* and two other immortal symphonies, and his operas included *The Magic Flute*. Franz Joseph Haydn arrived in London during 1791, there to compose and conduct his symphonies 93 to 104. Over in the newly created United States, in 1789, George Washington was inaugurated as the first president. Meantime, at Port Jackson, Governor Arthur Phillip struggled to maintain a settlement and moved into Australia's first brick house in 1789.

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In conformity with the alert intellectual atmosphere during the closing years of the Age of Enlightenment, scientific and geographic curiosity provided a significant mix in cultural life. While trading opportunities lurked in the background when justifying global voyaging, savants sought geographical, biological and ethnic data in the interests of learning unrelated to imperial desires. Consequently, aboard *Recherche* and *Espérance*, in addition to seamen there were men of considerable scientific, literary and artistic talent. It was this genuinely objective pursuit of knowledge that rendered this expedition so important, reflecting the purposeful sense of the age. There were 11 such savants aboard, together with two doctors and several officers of intellectual calibre. Many of them kept journals. Not all men fulfilled their potential, and three had already abandoned ship in Cape Town, but it was an exceptionally talented group that probed the potential of south-eastern Tasmania.

This story concerns the cultural landscape that is the Recherche Bay region and the fate of the investigators and collections made there. It depends upon the recent spate of publications and translations dealing with the expedition. The presumed discovery of the vegetable garden planted by the French alerted conservationists to the potential significance of the area. I have drawn freely upon Edward and Maryse Duyker's excellent translation of *Bruny D'Entrecasteaux: voyage to Australia and the Pacific* (1998) and Edward Duyker's definitive *Citizen Labillardière* (2003). Frank Horner's *Looking For La Pérouse* (1995) is a clearly written and thoughtful account. Brian Plomley and Josiane Piard-Bernier put all researchers in their debt by translating various diarists in *The General* (1993). All these authors acknowledge their debt to Hélène Richard's *Le Voyage de d'Entrecasteaux a la recherché de La Pérouse* (1986).

ENDNOTES

¹ Plomley and Piard-Bernier, *The General*, 1993: 114 – Kermadec.

² Duyker and Duyker (eds and trans), *Bruny d'Entrecasteaux: voyage to Australia and the Pacific*, 2001: 32.